

Relevancy Trumps All for Reluctant Readers | YA Underground

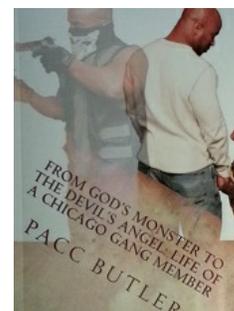
www.slj.com/2014/10/reviews/books/relevancy-trumps-all-for-reluctant-readers-ya-underground/

As I read, and read, and read some more, I am always looking for the combination of elements that will make the book a hot read for reluctant readers and the kids I serve in the YA Underground.

The winning recipe, and I can't say it enough, is this:

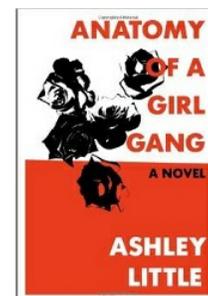
1. A great cover.
2. Lots of action and adventure—exterior action, not interior. Prose that shows, not tells.
3. Relevant (and for my teens this means real).
4. White space and a large type face.

I wrote about Pacc Butler's book *From God's Monster to the Devil's Angel: Life of a Chicago Gang Member* (Createspace, 2014) as my top pick in the last YA Underground, but I lamented the cover. Well, he's changed it. I love the new cover, and it will surely have the book flying off the shelves.



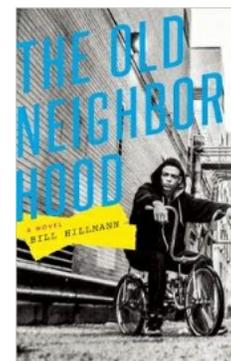
Runaway Thoughts, an anthology of kids writing about the pain of the prison system, also has an updated cover image.

My current top pick is *Anatomy of a Girl Gang* (Arsenal Pulp, 2014), by Ashley Little, who has written for Orca Book Publishers. This title has action, relevancy, and a strong layout—all must-haves for reluctant readers—though it lacks a great cover. Raw, real, and written at a rapid pace, the book describes the formation and dissolution of a gang of teenagers, told from the multiple perspectives of the girls involved. It has a deserved starred review from Kirkus and is flying off the shelves in spite of the cover (it helps that the word *gang* is in the title).



In many instances, a book's heft can be an intimidating barrier for reluctant readers; however, if it hits all the four points, it can still take off—genre can triumph over size. Kerry Sutherland, youth services librarian at Akron-Summit County Public Library in Northeast Ohio, recommends several 400-plus page books that will still appeal to reluctant readers. Sutherland has been involved with outreach to homeless and marginalized teens for over nine years, most currently with Safe Landing Youth Shelter for Girls.

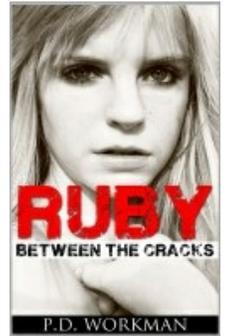
The first of Sutherland's suggestions is *The Old Neighborhood* (Curbside Splendor, 2014), a debut novel from *Chicago Tribune* writer Bill Hillman. Having grown up on Chicago's South Side, teenage Joe is aware of the dangers of drugs and gangs, but he also feels a deep connection to his neighborhood. He also knows that the secrets that bind him to his family and friends can be more powerful than his sense of right and wrong. This coming-of-age novel gets down and dirty, revealing hard truths about the challenges of attempting to both stay loyal to loved ones and obey the law on the Chicago streets.



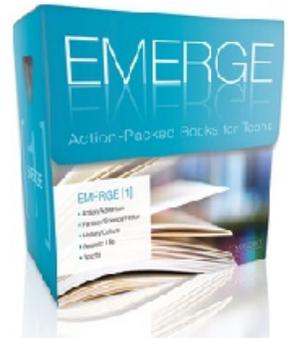
Sutherland's second recommendation is P.D. Workman's *Ruby: Between the Cracks: Vol. 1* (Workman, 2014). The title character is a young teen in foster care who is sexually involved with her case worker, one of many relationships she initiates with adult men. Taken from her parents because of suspected abuse, she wanders aimlessly in pursuit of freedom while in desperate need of emotional security. *Ruby* has super dense type, but fans of Ellen Hopkins's books will love the soap opera that is

Ruby's troubled life, including pregnancies, gang and drug involvement, and post-traumatic stress issues.

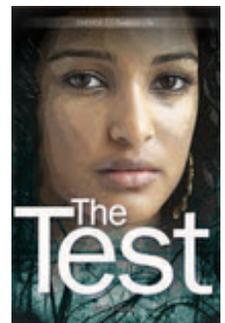
On the other extreme, there are super short, full-color books. Saddleback's "Emerge" boxed sets, part of the publisher's Teen Emergent Reading Libraries [TERL](#), are ideal for my adolescents who read at a lower level. I always have quite a few preschool reading-level teens, and there's not a lot out there for them. Forty-eight pages each, with a count of around 500 words, these books are simple, personal, and concrete, without complex themes and abstractions. Some of the photos feel a little clean cut and young for my crowd, but they still work. Eric, a PreK-level reader, tried P.J. Gray's *The Test* (2014), a book in which a pregnancy test prompts a girl to look back on her relationship with her boyfriend. Eric said it was the first book he ever read and that "It was stuff I be doing. First they got along, then they didn't, then they did again," proving that subject matter that resonates with teens can be a surefire draw.



Of the five genres covered in the sets, the ones that work for my urban teens are realistic fiction and history/culture. The sports—mostly, not all—are activities that my teens don't engage in, such as swimming and skateboarding. Action/adventure books includes titles in which characters get lost in the winter wilderness—again, stuff that my teens aren't involved in (I'm based in California) and that therefore don't fill the relevancy requirement. Unfortunately, it's not possible to purchase titles individually in order to customize what will work with your students. Saddleback told *SLJ* that exposing kids to several different genres with different demographics actually leads to a higher level of engagement. Saddleback also mentioned they have incorporated nonfiction into every genre as well, to bring realism to the grouping. However, for my purposes and for kids who do like picture books they can relate to, I wish I could purchase simply the ones I want and not the entire set.



Anthony D. Ross's *Homeless at Age 13 to a College Graduate* (Step One, 2014) has the page count necessary for a low level reader, but the author makes a mistake common to self-published writers: a bad cover photo. The curlicue font only makes things worse. However, the book itself is important and relevant to virtually all my teens, as would be any memoir of an individual thriving in spite of horrendous circumstances. The writing is decent and moves at a fast clip, though the book isn't action packed. Though Ross is up front about the obstacles he faced (lack of food, neglect, abuse), there's a positive thread running through the book, with Ross emphasizing his accomplishments.



I met Anthony Whyte, an *Essence* best-selling author and founder of Augustus Publishing and *Street Literature Review Magazine: The Voice of Hip Hop Literature*, while attending BookExpo America earlier this year. Had the conference been more diverse, he might have been mobbed. Due to popular demand, Whyte has begun writing for teens with *Thin Line: A Child's Eyes Never Lie* (Augustus, 2013). The opening action sequence sets the stage for a mystery—11-year-old Shareef's best friend and her family are gunned down. Why? The action slows way down to explain, the narrative becomes repetitive, and action is substituted for internal obsessions and stressors. The young protagonist uses words such as *aplomb* and *discrepancy* and freely walks into the crime scene several times using a hidden key—these are just a few of unbelievable aspects. Still, this one may satisfy the street lit genre crave, even though it's a tamed down version without sex or real action.



Thin Line may be one of these titles that works for kids but not for me. A book like this is challenging for me to get through: the repetitions, contradictory information, unbelievable characters or settings and some of the same old, same old—I keep putting the book down because I am bored, bored, bored. Yet for my kids, many of whom have special processing issues (for instance, they may be designated as special ed or may have ADHD or PTSD), relevancy trumps everything. Further, the repetition that so frustrates me is what helps them understand the

narrative.

Featured titles:

BUTLER, Pacc. *From God's Monster to the Devil's Angel: Life of a Chicago Gang Member*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2014. 162p. \$12.99. 9781494771669.

FRIEDMAN, Amy and Kalliope Panatiotakos, eds. Venice High School Students. *Runaway Thoughts: The Pain of the Prison System Anthology*. 2014. 183p. pp. \$20. ISBN 9781495113598.

GRAY, P.J. *The Test*. Emerge Boxed Set, TERL Level 1. Saddleback Publishing, 2014. 20 titles. \$449.95. ISBN 9781622508662.

HIGGINS, M.G. *Boy Soldier*. Saddleback, 2014. 48p. Sold in sets: Emerge History/Culture 9781622508105.

HIGGINS, M.G. *Stand*. Saddleback, 2014. 48p. Sold in sets: Emerge Sports 9781622508020.

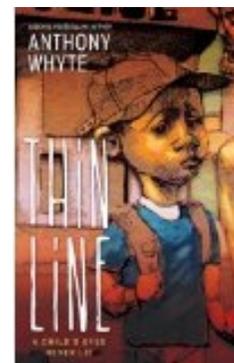
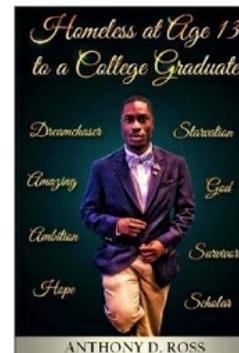
HILLMANN, Bill. *The Old Neighborhood: A Novel*. Curbside Splendor, 2014. 500p. \$ 15.95. 978-1940430003

LITTLE, Ashley. *Anatomy of a Girl Gang*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014. 254p. \$13.68 978-1551525297.

ROSS, Anthony. *Homeless at Age 13 to a College Graduate: An Autobiography*. Step One Publishing, 2014. 96p. \$8.99. 978-0991322435.

WHYTE, Anthony. *Thin Line: A Child's Eyes Never Lie*. Augustus Publishing, 2013. 224p. \$14.95. 9780982541524.

WORKMAN, P.D. *Ruby Between the Cracks #1*. Workman, 2014. 484p. \$17.75. 9780992153953.



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